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ABSTRACT

There are no quick and easy tips to motivating American Indian students into graduate education. The decision to make a commitment of time and money to graduate training, particularly at the doctoral level, and the ability to succeed in such a program, is affected by a number of factors: (1) parental and peer encouragement; (2) awareness of career options; (3) role models; (4) adequate academic preparation at the high school and undergraduate level; and (5) adequate financial and academic support services at the graduate level. No one factor can be identified as most important. Any attempt to motivate students by addressing one of these factors must be undertaken with the awareness that all are related. Teachers and counselors must overcome the lack of effective family and peer support systems for American Indian students at all levels of education. A basic fact is that American Indian adults often cannot motivate children because of their own low levels of education. Tribes can contribute to the process of motivation by providing scholarship support for college education, including graduate education. Most do so now. They should also see that their own community colleges or colleges in neighboring communities upgrade the educational opportunities of tribal members and make a commitment to encourage young people to become college teachers by promising jobs where possible. They might set up loan funds on the model of forgivable loans. For example, students who come back to the reservation to teach would be forgiven a certain part of the loan for each year of service. Most of all, tribes have to see that the development of human resources, their most important asset, is necessary to long-range development plans. They must realize that tribal members can benefit the tribe by being able to teach their college-level skills to future generations. (JHZ)

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AMERICAN INDIAN EDUCATION

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Motivating American Indians Into Graduate Studies

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ERIC® CLEARINGHOUSE ON RURAL EDUCATION and SMALL SCHOOLS

ERIC DIGEST

AMERICAN INDIAN EDUCATION

MOTIVATING AMERICAN INDIANS INTO GRADUATE STUDIES

Graduate education is important because it provides a level of training that provides professional competence in areas such as law, medicine, and higher education. This digest will deal with the factors that affect American Indian students' decisions concerning higher education and graduate school, and ways of motivating American Indian students to seek those degrees.

Why is graduate education important for American Indian students?

Education beyond the bachelor's degree level gives students increased knowledge and expertise and a wider range of career options because of their specialized knowledge. Graduate education differs from undergraduate education because it demands greater independence. Graduate students develop the ability to analyze questions, do research on them, and propose solutions. In professional areas such as law, education, medicine, and business administration, graduate education provides training in the ways of carrying out professional responsibilities in a very specific manner. In academic areas such as economics, political science, or sociology, graduate education provides mastery of a body of knowledge that can be imparted to students. Research can benefit Indian tribes and communities by providing new solutions to problems that may be confronting them. Teachers can train new generations of scholars. Graduate education can develop human knowledge; which is probably the most important resource that Indian people have.

What is the main obstacle to motivating American Indian students into graduate education?

The main problem in getting Indians into graduate school is that there are so few of them who get into college. The drop-out rates for American Indian students are higher than for whites and similar to or higher than those for other minority groups at all levels of education from high school through college and graduate school. Only 55% of Indian students graduate from high school, as compared with 83% of white students. Only 17% enter college, as compared with 38% of white students. Those who graduate from college with a bachelor's degree are about as likely as white students to go on to graduate school, but only 2% complete a graduate or professional degree, as compared with 8% of white students (Astin, 1980). The problem is not so much in motivating those students who have succeeded in college as it is in motivating them to stay in school to get a bachelor's degree--a necessary prerequisite to a graduate degree. The problem goes back even further to the high drop out rates in high school. The real job of motivation must begin at the high school level. It is there that students begin to choose courses that will prepare them to succeed academically in college and in graduate school.

What factors motivate students to get graduate degrees?

Career opportunities are the main motivators for students to pursue. These must be kept in the minds of students at all levels of education. High school counselors must begin to tell students that they should prepare for well-paying jobs. They should point out that many Indian people have succeeded in becoming lawyers, social workers, and teachers. The majority of graduate degrees that Indians earn are in professional fields at the master's level. In 1979 (the latest year for which comprehensive figures are available), almost 300,000 masters degrees were awarded nationally, of which 999, or 0.3%, were received by Indian students. The largest numbers were in education (451), business (135), public affairs (81), and health (59). These fields are generally perceived as important areas of professional expertise in Indian communities.

At the doctoral level, of the more than 26,000 doctoral degrees awarded by U.S. colleges and universities in 1981, 89 (0.3%) went to American Indians. Of those, 12 were in the Life Sciences, 14 in the Social Sciences (the majority in Psychology), and 42 (almost half) were in Education. These numbers can be used to impress students with the need for Indian representation in graduate school. These figures also illustrate the fact that there are Indians who have made it through graduate programs.

What factors must counselors overcome in motivating Indian students into graduate school?

Teachers and counselors must overcome the lack of effective family and peer support systems for Indian students at all levels of education. A basic factor is that Indian adults often cannot motivate Indian children because of their own low levels of education. According to the 1980 census, only 5.2% of Indian people in the 40-69 age range had completed 17 years of school, while 14.2% of the white population (almost 3 times as many) had completed that much. Thus, as a percentage of their respective populations, Indians who were in the age range to be responsible for college age children in 1980 were much less likely to have completed graduate education themselves. They were not able to tell their children what graduate education might demand or what opportunities it might present.

A second factor is the income level of families. The costs of college education continue to increase, and have done so at rates higher than the inflation rate of the American economy. The 1980 census data showed, however, that the median income of Indian families was $13,724, while that of white families was $20,835. This difference indicates how difficult it is for an average Indian family to afford the costs of college education—especially the costs of graduate education which continue for a longer time.

A third factor is the possible relationship between parental educational and income level and student scores on the Graduate Record Examination. The GRE is a widely used (although not universal) measure of student potential to complete a graduate program. There is a demonstrable, although not causal, relationship between parental educational and income level and student scores on the Graduate Record Examination. Some professional schools have specialized tests, such as the MCAT (Medical College Admission Test), the GMAT (Graduate Management Admission Test) and the LSAT (Law School Admission Test).

Since the tests are used by many universities as part of the decision-making process on graduate admissions, their importance is significant to the access of minority students to graduate education. Although research has shown that minority students consider that the tests are more crucial to graduate admission than do white students, graduate departments that use the tests do not make automatic decisions based on them. Counselors should be aware of this fact and convey it to students.

A fourth factor in the underrepresentation of American Indians in graduate school is the nature of the colleges that they attend. In the fall of 1978, the largest percentages of American Indian students enrolled in higher education were in 2-year colleges (53% of the total). Only 12% were enrolled in universities, i.e., institutions that had some graduate programs. Students who enter junior colleges are substantially less likely to get a baccalaureate degree than students who enter 4-year colleges (Austin. p. 41). The community colleges which serve Indian reservations, however, probably provide the only real opportunity for reservation residents to enter college programs.

Although college transfer programs are offered at virtually all Indian-controlled community colleges, the majority of students are enrolled in vocational programs. Tribal councils must support the development of their own tribally controlled community colleges. These colleges must offer the kinds of basic liberal arts courses in writing skills, sciences, social sciences, and humanities that will prepare students to transfer to 4-year colleges. Tribal education specialists should seek the assistance of teachers at those colleges in structuring curricula to meet the requirements of transfer. An important issue in transferability of junior college courses is their comparability to courses offered at the 4-year institution. Tribal community colleges must begin to develop agreements with state institutions to assure that students will be able to transfer their units. Instructors and counselors at the junior colleges need to be able to advise students to take those courses that will transfer.

Indian students who attend 4-year institutions are less likely than white students to go to universities which offer graduate programs (19.7% of white students do, only 12.5% of Indian students). They are thus less likely to be exposed to the process of research that is the heart of academic graduate education. They are less likely to be taught by professors who are actively engaged in research. They do not see graduate students at work. Students who express an interest in graduate education should be encouraged strongly to attend an institution that has both undergraduate and graduate programs.

Role models are another factor in motivating Indian students into certain kinds of graduate education. Indian students at the undergraduate level see few Indian graduate students and probably even fewer Indian teachers. According to a report by the Carnegie Foundation based on a survey of college teachers in 1982-83,

only 0.3% were American Indian. Wherever possible, teachers at all levels of education should use Indian college teachers as resource people to make presentations in their classes. These teachers provide role models of successful Indian academics.

What can be done to motivate Indian students to seek graduate education?

The first step is to convince students that a graduate degree is an important means of obtaining employment. This is not difficult since virtually all students who express an interest in graduate education are interested in fields such as law or business administration, which promise employment after a 2 or 3 year period of training. The majority of Indian students who want to go to graduate school have chosen professional areas such as law, public health, social welfare, education, business administration, or medicine. Role models which meet the expressed needs of the Indian communities are available in these areas. They also provide the promise of well-paying positions after making a relatively short-term investment of time and money.

The availability of special funds and special programs which support graduate education is also extremely important as a motivator. The establishment of special programs as a means of motivating Indian students to pursue graduate education may entail a Catch-22 situation. The administration will look to the existence of an Indian constituency for such a program at the institution, while the purpose of establishing a program is to attract such a constituency to document a need for such a program (based on the kind of statistical evidence briefly presented). Community constituencies who will support the program also need to be identified.

The experience of the support program for American Indians in the School of Public Health at the University of California at Berkeley shows what can be done. The program began in 1971 with a proposal submitted by the School to the Indian Health Service. The need for Indian people to carry out administrative roles in the Service was demonstrated. An advisory board of Indian tribal leaders was set up. As the program graduated Indians with professional degrees who moved into important decision making positions, its reputation began to attract other Indian students. A strong network of alumni, with whom the director of the program kept in close contact, helped to spread word of the opportunities available. The program offered special support and created role models. In the years since 1971, the program at Berkeley has graduated some 130 Indians with the M.P.H. degree.

The federal government has helped to provide motivation for American Indian students through its support of fellowships in certain areas. The fellowship program supported by the Office of Indian Education in the U.S. Department of Education has provided support for Indian students who want to go into professional areas such as education, law, business administration, and natural resource management.

The federal government is one source of possible funding, although its resources for human services have been severely cut in the past few years. There are resources within the National Science Foundation for improvement of mathematics and science education at the pre-collegiate level, and for improvement of instruction at colleges and universities with significant minority enrollments. The requirements for at least 20% enrollment of a single minority group disqualify most institutions with Indian students from participating on the basis of small enrollment.

Private foundations provide another source of funding. The Phelps-Stokes Foundation in Washington, D.C., serves as a clearinghouse for information on funding sources of particular interest in Indian projects. Although the time and effort required to develop a full proposal and go through the negotiation process to achieve outside funding for an academic program represent a major investment, the result can provide significant motivation for Indian students.

The higher level of representation of American Indian students in professional fields of graduate study such as education and law, indicates the importance of federal financial assistance for Indian students in those areas. Counselors and teachers at the high school and college level must make a special effort to be aware of the special programs and sources of funding available for Indian students. Three major scholarship programs about which Indian students should have knowledge are: American Indian Scholarships, Inc., in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the Indian Fellowship Program in the U.S. Department of Education, and the Ford Foundation Fellowships for Minorities.

What role should teachers play in motivating students?

It is especially important that teachers begin to direct talented students toward graduate education at the freshman and sophomore level in high school. Those who wish to attract highly qualified Indian high school students into undergraduate programs should begin to work with college recruiters in making personal contact with high school teachers in areas that serve significant numbers of Indian students.

A model for motivation involves a series of personal contacts developed among teachers from the junior and senior high school level to the college level to the graduate level. A highly significant factor in the decision of students who go on to college is the influence of a teacher in high school. Certain key teachers in high school should be identified and asked to work with and encourage their most promising students to go on with their academic careers. When students can be assigned to specially trained teachers in college for academic advising, the likelihood of success and completion of degrees in college is enhanced.

One example of cooperative effort is that of Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, which has "adopted" Tuba City High School. Several faculty members from NAU are working on the development of college preparatory courses at Tuba City.

When college faculty are willing to begin to identify their students who show promise of succeeding in graduate school, and communicate this information to faculty members at institutions to which students apply for graduate work, it is more likely that those students will apply and will be admitted to graduate school. A typical way in which non-Indian students get into graduate school is by references from faculty members. What is known as the "Old Boy Network" in graduate admissions can be put to work for Indian students if faculty take an interest in identifying those students. The Ford Foundation has funded a project to create this kind of network among a group of 11 institutions: 2 Indian junior colleges, 4 primarily undergraduate state colleges and universities, and 5 major state universities with large graduate programs. A central office encourages the development of faculty networks through conferences and referrals of students identified by faculty at undergraduate institutions.

The key to graduate study is personal encouragement by teachers at all levels of education. Teachers should give advice that directs the student to college preparatory courses in reading, writing, languages, mathematics, and science courses. This means that teachers and counselors must have the idea that graduate education is a viable option and a potentially rewarding financial endeavor for their students. It also entails the realization that graduate education is not necessary for all students. Teachers and counselors must judge from their own experience with graduate education whether the students they are counseling are indeed willing and able to make the intellectual commitment that graduate school demands.

How can Indian tribes and communities begin to motivate their young people to seek graduate education?

Tribes and communities need to determine their own requirements for trained persons to provide skills to solve immediate problems. They need to consider ways to deal with long range goals and objectives.

The American Indian Center at UCLA conducted a survey of Indian tribal offices, colleges and universities, community groups, and federal and state agencies dealing with Indian people. The intent of the survey was to assess the needs that tribes, communities, and urban groups want met. The educational needs most often expressed were for professional expertise in tribal planning. A knowledge of business administration was the second major priority. Teaching came in as a third priority. College teaching, a major career objective for graduate education in academic subjects, was hardly mentioned at all.

Tribes and communities are major constituencies of educational institutions. Many already support their own junior colleges, and in some states they represent sizeable populations which should be able to make demands on institutions of higher education within their states. To be effective in these demands however, they need to look at their own requirements for the skills which they wish trained persons to possess. They also need to consider ways to deal with long range group goals and objectives. The major comments about college education from tribal leaders were that there is a greater need for career education and training for practical skills. Many responses from tribal officials indicated that they felt that college stressed abstract ideas, and did not give young people an understanding of the practical day-to-day concerns of the real world.

The responses of tribal officials indicate a basic problem with motivating Indian students into graduate education. Because tribal leaders feel that college does not adequately prepare students to deal with practical situations on reservations or in Indian communities, Indian students are sometime confronted with the situation of going away to college and not being able to find a job when they return home.

Tribes and communities need to consider what their own needs are for professional expertise in their own members. They should look to the importance of training tribal members to translate needs to the non-Indian world within which tribes must operate. Some Indian people must be able to serve as bridges between their own groups and the non-Indian world. They need to understand the process by which the non-Indian world operates. They can best do that by understanding the educational process which non-Indian professional people have been through.

Tribes can contribute to the process of motivation by providing scholarship support for college education, including graduate education. Most do so now. They should also see that their own community colleges or colleges in neighboring communities can upgrade the educational opportunities of tribal members and make a commitment to encourage young people to become college teachers by promising jobs where possible. They might set up loan funds on the model of forgiveable loans. For example, students who come back to the reservation to teach would be forgiven a certain part of the loan for each year of service. Most of all, tribes have to see that the development of human resources, their most important asset, is necessary to long-range development plans. They must realize that tribal members can benefit the tribe by being able to teach their college-level skills to future generations.

Are there any easy answers?

There are no quick and easy tips to motivating Indian students into graduate education. The decision to make a commitment of time and money to graduate training, particularly at the doctoral level, and the ability to succeed in such a program, is affected by a number of factors: parental and peer encouragement, awareness of career options, role models, adequate academic preparation at the high school and undergraduate level, and adequate financial and academic support services at the graduate level. No one factor can be identified as most important. Any attempt to motivate students by addressing one of these factors must be undertaken with the awareness that all are related.

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